

The Panofsky-Newman Controversy Iconography and Iconology Put to the Test of “Abstract” Art

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Princeton, February 1961. Among the numerous letters and envelopes which fill his desk daily, the almost seventy-year-old Erwin Panofsky notices the latest issue of *ARTNEWS*, a journal founded in 1902 that quickly became one of the most prestigious observatories and mouthpieces of contemporary art scene. He leafs through the pages inattentively, until he finds an enthusiastic review of his book, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*, penned by the art critic George Kubler (Kubler [1961]). Curious, he begins reading. He discovers that, instead of being the rather usual homage to an undisputed *auctoritas*, this brief essay represents an attempt to reconsider and reshape some fundamental concepts of his work by applying them to 1940s and 1950s American art. Kubler takes cue, in particular, from the famous law of disjunction between forms and meanings that, according to Panofsky, distinguished the medieval renaissances with respect to the Renaissance proper, on the basis of the principle that «wherever a sculptor or painter borrows a figure or a group from a classical work of art he almost invariably invests it with a non-classical, viz., Christian, meaning; conversely, wherever he borrows a theme from classical poetry, mythology, or history he almost invariably presents it in a non-classical, viz., contemporary form» (Panofsky [1960]: 25).

However, the reviewer replaces this original formulation of the «disjunction» concept – though it cannot be understood whether or not he fully realizes the theoretical shift with respect to Panofsky's initial idea – with a different one, believed to be typical of contemporary American art and based on the assumption of such a conspicuous break with traditional (i.e. European) forms that it could also bring about, at least potentially, a rift on the meanings to which those same forms gave shape. If Panofsky's principle of «disjunction» entails the persistence of a certain form to express a different meaning or, vice-versa, the persistence of a certain meaning expressed in different

forms, Kubler argues instead that the dissolution of the traditional formal values enacted by so-called Abstract Expressionism may lead to a parallel disintegration of content-related values, thereby inaugurating nothing less than a new «renaissance» in art and culture history in general. After Athens, Florence, and Paris, it is now up to New York to play the role of the world capital of art, and it is precisely from this perspective that *Renaissance and Renascences* should be regarded as «a signpost in the difficult reorientation that our actual periodological change requires» (Kubler [1961]: 34).

Faced with such an attempt to “update” his own theories, Panofsky responds with refined ambiguity in a letter to the Director of *ARTNEWS*, Henry La Farge: on the one hand, he gives thanks for the kind words about his work, while on the other hand he immediately expresses his distress for the fact that those same kind words «seem to encourage contemporary artists to read my book or even to invest the outrageous sum of \$ 19 in it... because it is really directed only to what a less well-meaning colleague has called “the pedants”» (Panofsky [1961a]: 6). The irony is so explicit that between the lines readers note the Princeton professor’s sarcastic grimace. By defining the price of *Renaissance and Renascences* «outrageous», Panofsky obviously does not belittle the value of his book: rather, with skilled rhetoric, he pretends to put himself in the shoes of those contemporary artists Kubler’s review was intended for, leading readers to think – *contra* Kubler himself – that in their eyes the book would not be worth the cost. With feigned modesty he includes himself among the «pedants», that is, his art history colleagues, thus underlining that the book was specifically and exclusively conceived for them. So, with few words, Panofsky formally offers his thanks for the review, but actually (and slyly) contests its basic assumption, protesting against Kubler’s attempt to extend the validity of his own analyses to artistic movements that had taken hold in post-World War II America.

The true polemical target concealed behind what is, though expressed with gentle irony, a clear-cut bashing of Kubler’s thesis emerges even more clearly further on in the letter, as Panofsky whips off his mask and takes off the pedant disguise in order to give tit for tat to those artists who, in his opinion, may consider excessive or even offensive the money needed to buy a copy of *Renaissance and Renascences*:

Conversely, I find it increasingly hard to keep up with contemporary art, particularly with the titles affixed to some of the objects. A signal example has appeared in the current number of *ARTNEWS* [Feb. ’61] where Mr. Barnett Newman’s composition is entitled *Vir Heroicus Sublimus*. I find myself confronted with three different interpretations of the curious form «Sublimus»: does Mr. Newman imply that he, as Aelfric says of God, is “above grammar”; or is it a misprint; or is it plain illiteracy? In the optimistic assumption that the first of these possible

interpretations is true, and with my best thanks... (Panofsky [1961a]: 6).

He then signs the letter, putting his work address in plain view and singling each word out, «almost as if wanting to dot the i's and cross the t's» (Wyss [1993]: 6)¹ and to proudly reclaim a guild-like, corporative membership: «Erwin Panofsky, The Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton». The German-American scholar takes cue from a simple review to set the limit between his cultural *milieu* and that of contemporary artists, considered not only profoundly extraneous, but also frivolous and, thus, dismissible. In fact, it cannot be overlooked that the abstract-expressionist masterpieces Panofsky has in mind are simply referred to as «objects», thus bearing witness to a polemical intent and an undeniably negative value judgment: those works are nothing more than mere “things”, colour-sodden surfaces. Exactly like the canvases “painted” by Betsy, a chimpanzee that landed on the front pages in the late 1950s for her supposed skills as an artist and for the apparent resemblance between her “style” and that of some American Abstract artists². In two letters both dated November 1958, Panofsky explicitly refers to this: in the first, he replies to the Hungarian art theorist György Kepes, who had invited the Princeton professor to publish an essay on «Visual Arts Today», claiming he is totally incompetent to speak about contemporary art (Panofsky [1958a]: 357) and affirming he is able to say something only on the work of Betsy, thus implicitly suggesting he finds no particular difference between her works and those by Abstract artists. Moreover, in the second letter, he writes to a young PhD student and declares, without beating around the bush, that «there is, in fact, no methodical possibility of distinguishing the productions of Betsy from those of, let us say, Mr. Jackson Pollock» (Panofsky [1958b]: 359)³.

Given the above, it is not hard to imagine that a review of *Renaissance and Renaissance* in the most widespread journal among contemporary art lovers could not but irk the peevish Princeton professor, who as early as September 1959 had expressed to his friend John Canaday his own conviction of not being at all stuck in the past or «reactionary» as what might seem «to the readers, editors, and advertisers of *ARTNEWS*» (Panofsky [1959]: 527). The relationship between the professor and the magazine's staff was, in short, star-crossed, the kind that starts off bad and ends even worse.

And, in fact, that is how it went. Panofsky's letter to La Farge was not intended for publication, but in the end it came out (although in a slightly shortened form) in the next

¹ To this day, Wyss's booklet offers the most accurate reconstruction of the whole story.

² See on this topic Janson (1959), Morris (1968), Lenain (1990).

³ Similar in content is Panofsky (1957).

journal's issue⁴, maybe due to a banal oversight (as the editor of *ARTNEWS* Alfred Frankfurter sustains, begging pardon for his error)⁵ or rather, in all likelihood, due to a well-pondered choice. Barnett Newman himself, who represented a true intellectual authority among the abstract expressionists, promptly replied. Without a moment's delay, the artist whips out his consummate skills as a polemist to defeat the adversary on his own ground. First of all, the sarcasm and wit, used to clarify that the *Sublimus* form Panofsky was so contrary to – incorrectly used in the caption to a picture reproducing *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* and included in an essay by Robert Rosenblum titled *The Abstract Sublime* (Rosenblum [1961]), appearing in that very same issue of *ARTNEWS* along with Kubler's review – was clearly a banal typo:

Had Panofsky read the article, it would have been obvious to him that it is a misprint because in Prof. Rosenblum's article, the word is spelled as I intended it, «Sublimis». Only in the caption is it «Sublimus». Were I to follow the Panofskian dialectic, I could charge that he is above reading the text, or that he did not read, or that he cannot read. I shall not, however, stoop to the Panofskian techniques in order to hope that the third of these is true. I shall be generous enough to believe that he attacked me without reading the text (Newman [1961a]: 6).

By resorting to the same logic as Panofsky, Newman easily ridicules the arrogant professor who did not even bother to read Rosenblum's essay in its entirety, preferring to limit himself to the caption and exploiting it as a mere pretext useful only to unfoundedly attack the most recent artistic practices. But there is more. Brandishing another subtle dialectical weapon, typical of his proverbial erudition, Newman argues against the assumption that the form *sublimus* is grammatically incorrect, supporting his argument with learned references to Accius and Cicero and demonstrating – with the help of an unique «prompter» (Wyss [2008])⁶, his friend Meyer Schapiro – that the use of this variant of the word could be considered as legitimate as the more common *sublimis*. Finally (and this is what interests us here the most), the letter closes with the statement that «for a work of art to be a work of art, it must rise above grammar and syntax – *pro gloria Dei*» (Newman [1961a]: 6). This is the theoretical crux proper: Newman blames Panofsky for having speciously dwelled upon a totally unessential aspect, upon a merely formal matter, without being in no way able to understand the needs and feelings that likened

⁴ «ARTNEWS», 60, 2, April 1961, p. 6.

⁵ See Frankfurter's letter to Panofsky (Frankfurter [1961]: 1003) on 9 August 1961, as well as Panofsky's clearly irritated reply of 18 August (Panofsky [1961b]: 1010).

⁶ In a letter dating Spring 1961, Newman thanks Schapiro for his «“sublime” help» against Panofsky (Newman [1992]: 218).

(though in very different ways) all the major exponents of American abstract art.

The reply from Princeton arrived shortly afterwards and is rather surprising, seeing that Panofsky seems to take no notice of the more important issues raised by Newman. Instead, he prefers to keep focusing on the matter from a linguistic point of view, admitting that the form *sublimus* does indeed exist, but it can only be referred to concrete objects or phenomena occupying an elevated position in space, but neither to abstract notions nor to human beings. Even though grammatically acceptable, that form was therefore used in the wrong context, despite Newman's alleged knowledge of Latin. The closing is stinging: «When I am shown a classical author using such *juncturae* as “homo sublimus”, “vir sublimus”, or “heroes sublimi”, I shall extend my apologies to the composers and proof-readers of *ARTNEWS* and shall be glad to think of Mr. Newman as a *PIC-TOR SUBLIMUS*» (Panofsky [1961c]: 956-957)⁷.

Even before being published, Panofsky's letter reached Newman, who thus had all the time to come up with a new reply and include it in that same journal issue. At first, the artist decides to keep up with the linguistic aspects of the controversy, accusing the professor (now declassified to a mere «doctor») of having surreptitiously transformed what in the beginning had been a matter of *grammar* into a different problem concerning *style*: but in this case, too, his arguments do not seem convincing, because *sublimus* could surely be called – contrary to Panofsky's thesis – a human being as well, according to an elevated and archaic style. But it is clear that all this debating, which seems to excite the Princeton professor, represents for Newman a boring pastime for learned scholars, only useful to attract attention away from the key point, which instead regards the attempt «to deny the artist's right to create poetic language, the right of *potestas audenti*» (Newman [1961b]: 6)]. The shift is subtle but crucial, because the discourse goes from a purely linguistic level to a more generically artistic one: Newman claims the right to «poetic license» both in using an archaic term and in disclosing new paths for the visual arts. Art has never been a question of mere grammar, and it does not have to slavishly conform to pre-established vocabularies or specific rules: rather, it is *poiesis*, that is, the *creation* of new vocabularies and new rules that modify or even overwhelm previous canons and perspectives.

The match comes to an end with this final move: Panofsky tried to elude the ques-

⁷ I do not agree with Beat Wyss when he argues that Panofsky's words were just a kind of benevolent appreciation of Newman's work expressed «in a breezy tone in a bid to achieve a peaceful settlement of the controversy» (Wyss [1993]: 10). Similar words are also to be found in Wyss (2008): 93.

tions raised by his opponent by ignoring them, attempting to focus on a merely linguistic problem. Instead, Newman accepts a challenge he is not interested in, waging war on what he considers an absolutely irrelevant aspect of the question at hand, and in the end takes advantage of the opportunity to stress what he is more focused on, namely the value and seriousness of contemporary art practices: «Yet I hope that he [i.e. Panofsky] is not convinced to be called “Pictor sublimis” or “sublimus” by one who has consistently shown himself to be unfeeling towards any work of art since Dürer is too much» (Newman [1961b]: 6)]. Checkmate: Panofsky would never respond to these final, blunt words.

Behind what might at first glance seem like a decidedly marginal episode in the history of the often clashing relations between artists on the one hand and art historians and theorists on the other, in reality conceals a complex and delicate matter: whether or not iconology can be applied to “abstract” (that is, non-figurative) art. If we were to stick to Panofsky art-historical hermeneutics, we should say that in the case where the formal elements of an image do not allow any mimetically reproduced *sujet* (be it a mountain, an animal, or a human being) to be singled out, the basic level of pre-iconographic identification seems to fail, without which one cannot understand how to reach the second level, that of iconography, where a name is given – on the basis of one or more texts – to the subject portrayed, detecting the «stories and allegories» (Panofsky [1939]: 29) at the core of the work. However, without this second passage it is also impossible to reach the third and final level, that of iconological analysis, focusing on the very fact that any particular representation is based on principles which reveal «the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion – qualified by one personality and condensed into one work» (Panofsky [1939]: 30). The almost total lack of any reference to non-representational, non-objective art within Panofsky’s published works seems to go in the same direction: the *Mandrillo* by Franz Marc, discussed in the famous essay *On the Problem of Describing and Interpreting Works of the Visual Arts* (Panofsky [1932]), remains an example of *figurative* art, where a monkey, some branches and leaves are still evident, even though only to a “learned” gaze. *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* is instead a large-format canvas (circa 5.5 m in width x 2.5 m in height) covered in bright red crossed by five vertical *zips*, and nothing else. So who is the *Vir* in the title? Where is the hero of the painting? *Sublimis* is he defined on the basis of which criteria? From a strictly Panofskian point of view, these questions are simply senseless: the polemical correspondence with Newman shows all the confusion and irritation of one looking for men and heroes but finding nothing except a colour furrowed by some lines.

And yet that *Vir* is indeed present, even if he remains unseen. In order to find him (or rather, to make him manifest), one needs first of all to follow a suggestion given by Newman during his solo exhibition inaugurated on April 23, 1951 at the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York. On a sign hanging in the entrance to the room, visitors could read a short *vademecum* concerning the way Newman's paintings should be observed: «There is a tendency to look at large pictures from a distance. The large pictures in this exhibition are intended to be seen from a short distance» (Newman [1992]: 178). By following these "instructions for use" and approaching the work step after step, we find ourselves before it, in its presence, so to speak, overwhelmed by an immense sea of red. While running the ever-more real risk of drowning in colour, we instinctively cling onto the *zips*, as if they were some kind of safety lifeboats: but these do not help either, as they display no regularity, no norm, no precise relationship that may provide a hold for a tottering intellect faced with the absolute absence of measure. Those lines have none of the mathematical balance found in Mondrian, an artist who Newman repeatedly accuses of having reduced painting to mere geometric decoration⁸.

Along with this is the fact that the large format of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (as with many other abstract expressionist works from those years)⁹ must be observed up-close to elude the frame intended as a margin, as a boundary keeping the reality of life clearly separate from the unreality of the image: the borders between the two realms blur, thus challenging the viewer's ability to distinguish one from the other. By approaching – or daring to approach – Newman's work, all reassuring certainties are gradually undermined, and what one initially thought would be a simple visit to an art gallery suddenly becomes indescribable disorientation. When confronted with *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* one feels like Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* or *Monk by the Sea*, which have become paradigmatic examples of that feeling which a long and consolidated tradition has called «sublime». Only now, *we* are the wanderers, the monks, and the sea is the painting itself: we are no longer invited to empathize with the characters portrayed, to walk in their shoes, because now *we are* in their shoes. There are no more filters, no more mediations, no more reassuring distances between us and the boundless, overwhelming force facing us and seemingly «about to engulf one», as Frank O'Hara said

⁸ See for instance Newman (1945), in particular p. 141: «The insistence of the abstract artists that subject matter be eliminated, that art be made pure, has served to create a result similar to that in Mohammedan art, which insisted on eliminating anthropomorphic shapes. Both fanaticisms, which strive toward an abstract purity, force the art to become a mere arabesque».

⁹ Burke considered greatness of dimensions as one of the most powerful causes of the sublime (Burke [1757]: 124-125).

in relation to the work of Newman's friend and colleague, Jackson Pollock (O' Hara [1959]: 29).

In a famous essay titled *The Sublime Is Now*, Newman intentionally refers to the grand theorists of the sublime from the 1700s and 1800s in order to offer a unique perspective on that enigmatic mixed sentiment, on that paradoxical unpleasant pleasure (or pleasant displeasure) Kant opposed to beauty intended as an essential characteristic of artworks. And it is precisely this opposition that is purposeful to the theoretical project of abstract expressionism as an artistic movement aimed at completely denying «that art has any concern with the problem of beauty» (Newman [1948]: 173). Form and composition (precisely this latter term was used by Panofsky to define Newman's art in the first letter published in *ARTNEWS*, what proves he had completely misunderstood the meaning of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*) must be replaced by the formless and the measureless, and only these traits may allow the viewer to reach a level of engagement as never before. Therefore, the *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* is not to be found *within* the work, but *outside* it: he is the person who opens himself to the creation of Newman, he who "listens" to it, he who accepts being overwhelmed by its unfathomable boundlessness and faces that «spatial, emotional, and cognitive» (Bertolini [2008]: 395) disorientation which is the same of human existence *tout court* – sentiments which were certainly strongly felt in an America that had just left behind a world war, but which are more generally typical for *homo duplex*, for humans as rational animals constitutively poised between sensibility and reason, instinct and intellect, impulse and reflection.

Thus, Newman's canvas takes on a literally «enveloping and englobing» dimension (Bertolini (2008): 394) that transforms the mere spectator into an authentic – though involuntary – actor, invited not to contemplate the work with a quiet and detached aesthetic attitude, but rather to become part of the work itself, losing himself in it as if in a new and unknown world, where he feels defenceless. Approaching that painting – how inappropriate and empty this word sounds by now! – is the condition required to experience its pull and even its violence, to really be in its power. The disorientation generated by the absence of any mimetic form of recognisability and of any reassuring regularity is only a first step aimed at understanding, or rather at *activating* the work; the second step, complementary to the first, is what transforms a seemingly negative experience into a proper sublime experience, consisting of an oxymoronic coexistence of pleasure and displeasure. Meditating on this, Jean-François Lyotard claimed that *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* «belongs to the Annunciations, the Epiphanies» (Lyotard [1984a]: 79) – it is a sort of evangelical message:

The message “speaks” of nothing; it emanates from no one. It is not Newman who is speaking, or who is using painting to show us something. The message (the painting) is the messenger; it “says”: «Here I am», in other words, «I am yours» or «Be mine». [...] The message is the presentation, but it presents nothing; it is, that is, presence (Lyotard [1984a]: 80).

Therefore, an authentic revelation is the manifestation of something that was not there before or was not at all necessary – and yet *it is indeed there*. This pure and simple being something rather than nothing makes up the epiphany, made possible by the artist’s creative act: the painting «is not difficult to describe, but the description is as flat as a paraphrase. The best gloss consists of the question: what can one say? Or of the exclamation “Ah”. Of surprise: “Look at that”. So many expressions of a feeling which does have a name in the modern aesthetic tradition (and in the work of Newman): the sublime. It is feeling of “there [voilà]”» (Lyotard [1984a]: 80). This «there» is not merely the work intended as a physical object, but rather the event that manifests itself *thanks to* the work, the feeling that binds the viewer to the work. And that is a feeling of the happening itself, of the inexpressible *presence* of the event: «One would have to read *The Sublime is Now* not as *The Sublime is Now* but as *Now the Sublime is Like This*. Not elsewhere, not up there or over there, not earlier or later, not once upon a time. But as here, now, it happens that... and it’s this painting. Here and now there is this painting, rather than nothing, and that’s what is sublime» (Lyotard [1984b]: 93).

The correspondence in *ARTNEWS* could have offered an artist and an art historian a great opportunity to confront one another on this new declination of the sublime, but Panofsky opted to discuss the correct way a word was supposed to be written. What comes to mind is that, in the end, he *could* not have done otherwise, given the theoretic premises his entire hermeneutic methodology rests upon, as it is based on acknowledging and describing a *sujet*. And yet, if he had bothered to read Rosenblum’s article where that infamous caption was found, the elderly Princeton professor would have discovered that a young art critic was attempting to apply iconology to non-figurative art: even the simple layout of that essay – which Beat Wyss (Wyss [1993]: 6) rightly compared to the one in the famous *Mnemosyne* atlas by Aby Warburg, who exerted unmatched influence on Panofsky’s thought (Wyss [1993]: 18) – displays the surprising pairing of figurative paintings taking root in the romantic tradition like *Gordale Scar* by James Ward or *The Creation* by John Martin with the non-figurative canvases of Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, and Barnett Newman. In short, Rosenblum was trying to show how some of the main exponents of abstract expressionism referred with their works to classical texts devoted to the sublime – and this was iconography; but he

was also trying to clarify that these artists offered a *new* perspective on the sublime by focusing on the dramatic disorientation of contemporary man and the attempt to create his own «world view» – and this was iconology. Kubler’s review and Rosenblum’s essay were both heading in the same direction, as they were animated by the same basic will: they both attempted to clarify how an art form where, seemingly, “there is nothing to be seen”, actually shows the world as had never been seen (or *could* have been seen) before.

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